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# Achaemenid royal inscriptions

The **Achaemenid royal inscriptions** are the surviving inscriptions in cuneiform script from the Achaemenid Empire, dating from the 6th to 4th century BCE (reigns of Cyrus II to Artaxerxes III). These inscriptions are primary sources for the history of the empire, along with archaeological evidence and the administrative archives of Persepolis. However, scholars are reliant on Greek sources (such as Herodotus) to reconstruct much of Achaemenid history.<sup>[1]</sup>

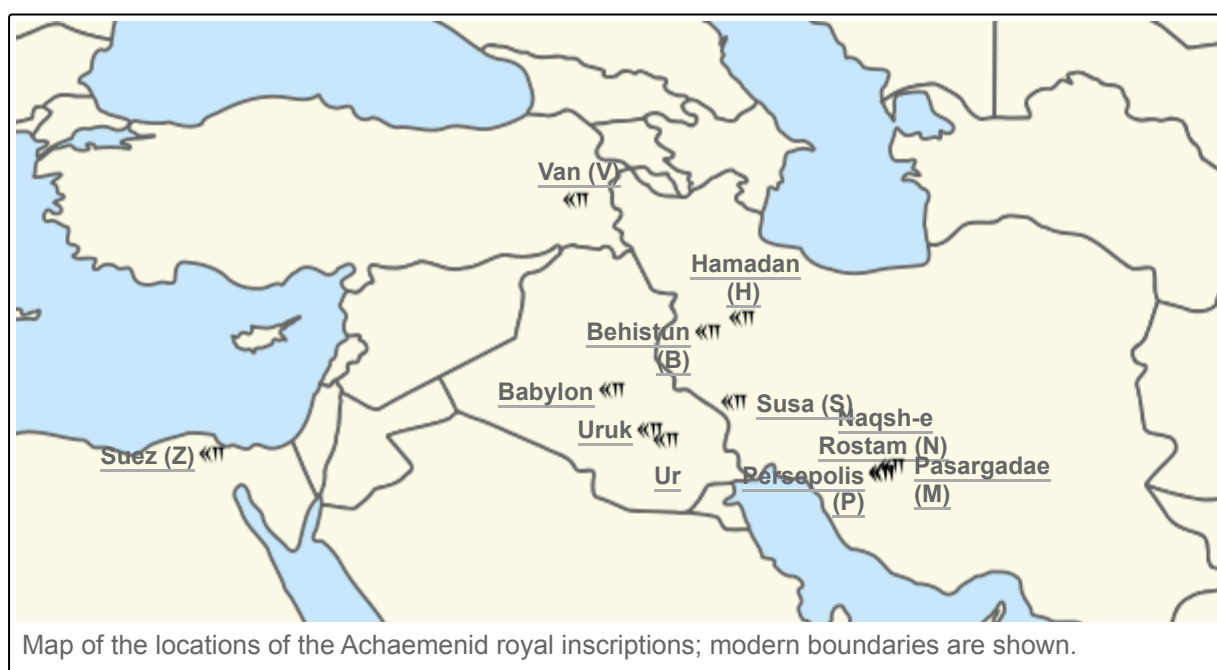
The Achaemenid royal inscriptions differ from earlier Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions in their multilingualism, rhetorical style and their structure.<sup>[2]</sup> The inscriptions are mostly trilingual – in Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian, which use two separate scripts (Babylonian and Elamite use variants of the same cuneiform). When they appear together, the privileged position is usually occupied by the Old Persian inscription: at the top when arranged vertically, and in the middle when arranged horizontally.<sup>[2]</sup>

The initial decipherment of cuneiform was based on the Achaemenid royal inscriptions from Persepolis, later supplemented with the Behistun Inscription. Scholars deciphered the Old Persian cuneiform script first, followed by the Babylonian and Elamite language versions using the trilingual inscriptions.<sup>[3]</sup>



The Behistun inscription, the longest and perhaps the most famous of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions.

## Overview



The trilingual inscriptions illustrate the multi-ethnic complexity of the Achaemenid Empire: Old Persian is an Indo-European language, Babylonian is a Semitic language, and Elamite is a language isolate. The three versions of the trilingual inscriptions are not exact translations of each other.

Sometimes passages are added in one language version that do not appear in the other two. There are also differences in details when the text refers to specific people: the Old Persian version often emphasizes the rulers, the Elamite version the locations, and the Babylonian version the subject peoples, reflecting the different social classes that spoke each language.<sup>[2]</sup>

A few Achaemenid inscriptions are instead written in Egyptian hieroglyphs, for example in stelae found near the Suez Canal. Other hieroglyphic text has been found on crockery and pottery vessels that were made in Egypt but excavated at Persepolis, Susa, and possibly Babylonia. A statue of Darius I was also made in Egypt but brought to Susa.<sup>[2]</sup>

Imperial Aramaic is conspicuous by its absence from the inscriptions, despite it being the official language of the empire in later periods. There are a few isolated Aramaic characters on Achaemenid objects such as seals, weights and coins. The only royal inscription in Aramaic was found at Elephantine in Upper Egypt and is a copy of the Behistun inscription.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 1958 Richard Hallock compiled statistics on the length and numbers of the Elamite language versions of the royal inscriptions. The Behistun inscription is the longest inscription, whilst the other inscriptions are shorter and more repetitive. 44 Elamite texts are from the reign of Darius I, followed by 13 from that of Xerxes I, while the reigns of Artaxerxes I and Artaxerxes II have 7 texts each. Only two Elamite texts are from the reign of Cyrus II: the inscriptions CMA and CMc.<sup>[4]</sup>

Most of the inscriptions have been found in the Achaemenid heartlands (in Pasargadae, Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam) with smaller numbers in the wider empire (at Susa, Bisutun, Ganjnameh, Babylon). The only inscriptions outside of Iran are the Xerxes I inscription at Van, in eastern Anatolia, and some from the period of Cyrus II.<sup>[2]</sup>

The majority of the texts are found on royal monuments and statues, and many motifs are repeated. The inscriptions of Darius I were replicated by his successors, often with only small differences. Scholars have suggested that this was intended to emphasize the empire's continuity.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Decipherment

The decipherment of the Old Persian cuneiform script of the Achaemenids played a crucial role in the decipherment of the Babylonian and Elamite language versions and other cuneiform scripts in the Near East.<sup>[3]</sup> This decipherment was initially via names, or royal names, and the Avesta, which contains the Old Persian language in a developed form. The decipherment of the Achaemenid inscriptions can be divided into three phases.<sup>[7]</sup>

In a first step, the writing direction was found out and that the Achaemenid inscriptions are three different scripts with a common text. In 1620, García de Silva Figueroa dated the inscriptions of Persepolis to the Achaemenid period, identified them as Old Persian, and concluded that the ruins were the ancient residence of Persepolis. In 1621, Pietro della Valle specified the direction of writing from left to right. In 1762, Jean-Jacques Barthélemy found that an inscription in Persepolis resembled that found on a brick in Babylon. Carsten Niebuhr made the first copies of the inscriptions of Persepolis in 1778 and settled on three different types of writing, which subsequently became known as Niebuhr I, II and III. He was the first to discover the sign for a word division in one of the scriptures. Oluf Gerhard Tychsen was the first to list 24 phonetic or alphabetic values for the characters in 1798.<sup>[7]</sup>

The second phase, in which a first decipherment took place and correct values for a significant number of characters could be found, was initiated by Georg Friedrich Grotefend. He was the initial decipherer of Old Persian cuneiform. He was followed by Antoine-Jean Saint-Martin in 1822 and Rasmus Christian Rask in 1823, who was the first to decipher the name Achaemenides and the consonants m and n. Eugène Burnouf identified the names of various satrapies and the consonants k and z in 1833–1835. Christian Lassen contributed significantly to the grammatical understanding of the Old Persian language and the use of vowels. The decipherers used the short trilingual inscriptions from Persepolis and the inscriptions from Ganjname for their work.<sup>[7]</sup>

In a final step, the decipherment of the Behistun inscription was completed by Henry Rawlinson and Edward Hincks. Edward Hincks discovered that Old Persian is partly a syllabary.<sup>[7]</sup>

## List of inscriptions

### Designations

The designations or abbreviations of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions are based on the system introduced by Roland Grubb Kent in 1953.<sup>[8]</sup> Manfred Mayrhofer (1978), Alireza Shapour Shahbazi (1985) and Rüdiger Schmitt (2000) have expanded and modified it. Rüdiger Schmitt's 2009 *Die altpersischen Inschriften der Achaimeniden* is considered the modern reference work.<sup>[9]</sup>

The first letter of an inscription's designation does not designate the ruler or author, but the king whom the text expressly names, often right at the beginning in the nominative. The second capital letter designates the place of discovery and the third letter is an index used by scholars to distinguish multiple inscriptions from the same place.<sup>[8]</sup>

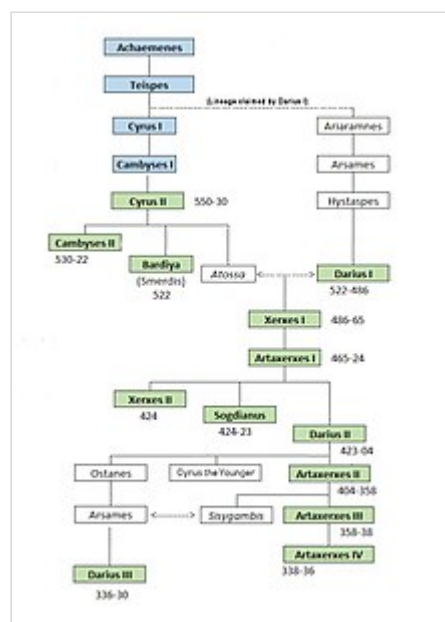
### Summary

The *Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions online (ARIO) Project*, part of the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus, currently contains 175 composite texts with 11,712 words.<sup>[10]</sup>

A 2021 list of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions counted 179 texts, from Darius I to Artaxerxes III.<sup>[11]</sup> This categorization places the "non-authentic" inscriptions (i.e. inscriptions are "genuine" and date from the Achaemenid period, but do not come from the king who is listed at the beginning of the inscriptions) under the king during whose reign they were produced. The best-known "non-authentic" inscriptions are AmHa and AsHa from Hamadan.<sup>[12]</sup>



Inscription XPc at Persepolis, on the southern side of the Palace of Darius. It is repeated three times, known as XPca, XPcb and XPcc. XPca and XPcc are facing each other towards the top of the antas (large pillars) on the left and right respectively; both have 15 lines in Old Persian, 14 lines in Elamite and 13 lines in Babylonian. XPcb is on the bottom wall alongside the carvings of Achaemenid soldiers, with 25 lines for each language version; Old Persian is in the middle, Elamite is on the right and Babylonian on the left.<sup>[6]</sup>



Achaemenid family tree

Languages		<u>Darius I</u>	<u>Xerxes I</u>	<u>Artaxerxes I</u>	<u>Darius II</u>	<u>Artaxerxes II</u>	<u>Artaxerxes III</u>	Total
		D	X	A	D2	A2	A3	
<b>Quadrilingual</b>	Persian, Babylonian, Elamite, Egyptian	1	15	5				<b>21</b>
<b>Trilingual</b>	Persian, Babylonian, Elamite	62	24	1	1	4	1	<b>93</b>
<b>Bilingual</b>	Persian, Elamite	4						<b>4</b>
	Persian, Babylonian		1	1				<b>2</b>
<b>Monolingual</b>	Persian	18	10	2	4	6	3	<b>43</b>
	Babylonian	4	2	1			1	<b>8</b>
	Elamite	3				4		<b>7</b>
	Aramaic	1						<b>1</b>
		<b>93</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>179</b>

## List

Name	King	Discovery date	Discovery place	Language	Publication
<b>AmHa</b>	Ariaramnes	1930	<u>Hamadan</u>	Old Persian	[13]
<b>AsHa</b>	Arsames	1920	Hamadan	Old Persian	[14]
<b>Cyrus A</b>	Cyrus II	1850	<u>Uruk</u>	Babylonian	[15]
<b>Cyrus B</b>		1923	<u>Ur</u>	Babylonian	[16]
<b><u>Cyrus Cylinder</u></b>		1879	Babylon	Babylonian	[17]
<b>CMa</b>		1812	Pasargadae	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[18]
<b>CMb</b>		1928	Pasargadae	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[19]
<b>CMc</b>		1928	Pasargadae	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[20]
<b>Zendan inscription</b>		1952	Pasargadae	Old Persian, Elamite	[21]
<b>CM-Fragment</b>		1961–1963	Pasargadae	Old Persian	[22]
<b><u>DB</u></b>	Darius I	1835	Behistun	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[23]
<b><u>DB Aram</u></b>		1906–1908	<u>Elephantine</u>	Aramaic	[24]

Name	King	Discovery date	Discovery place	Language	Publication
<b><u>DEa</u></b>		1851–1854	<u>Elvend</u>	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[25]
<b>DHa</b>		1926	Hamadan	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[26]
<b><u>DNa</u></b>		1843	<u>Naqsch-e Rostam</u>	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[27]
<b>DNb</b>		1843	Naqsch-e Rostam	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[28]
<b>DNc</b>		1848	Naqsch-e Rostam	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[29]
<b>DNd</b>		1848	Naqsch-e Rostam	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[30]
<b>DNe</b>		1848	Naqsch-e Rostam	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[31]
<b>DNf</b>		2001	Naqsch-e Rostam	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[32]
<b>DPa</b>		1737	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[33]
<b>DPb</b>		1704	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[34]
<b>DPc</b>		1664–1670	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[35]
<b>DPd</b>		1774–1778	Persepolis	Old Persian	[36]
<b>DPe</b>		1774–1778	Persepolis	Old Persian	[37]
<b>DPf</b>		1774–1778	Persepolis	Elamite	[38]
<b>DPg</b>		1774–1778	Persepolis	Babylonian	[39]
<b>DPh</b>		1933	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[40]
<b>DSaa</b>		1969/1970	Susa	Babylonian	[41]
<b>DSab</b>		1972	Susa	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian, <u>Egyptian</u>	[42]
<b>DSf</b>		1900	Susa	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[43]
<b>DSq</b>		1929	Susa	Old Persian	[44]
<b>DSz</b>		1969/1970	Susa	Elamite	[45]
<b><u>XEa</u></b>	Xerxes I	1851–1854	<u>Elvend</u>	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[46]
<b>XPa</b>		1839	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[47]

Name	King	Discovery date	Discovery place	Language	Publication
<b>XPb</b>		1711	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[48]
<b>XPc</b>		1711	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[49]
<b>XPd</b>		1851–1854	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[50]
<b>XVa</b>		1827	<u>Van</u>	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[51]
	Artaxerxes I				
	Darius II				
<b>A2Ha</b>	Artaxerxes II	1886	<u>Hamadan</u>	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[52]
<b>A2Hb</b>		1926	Hamadan	Old Persian	[53]
<b>A2Hc</b>		1948	Hamadan	Old Persian	[54]
<b>A2Hd</b>			Hamadan		
<b>A2Sa</b>		1849–1852	Susa	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[55]
<b>A2Sb</b>		1849–1852	Susa	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[56]
<b>A2Sc</b>		1890	Susa	Old Persian	[57]
<b>A2Sd</b>		1849–1852	Susa	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[58]
<b>A3Pa</b>	Artaxerxes III	1851–1854	Persepolis	Old Persian	[59]
<b>A3Pb</b>		1930	Persepolis	Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian	[60]

## Forgeries

Forgeries from the Near East have been known since the 19th century. But it is only since the 1930s that products from Iran have flooded the art market, after illegal excavations in western Iran increased enormously. The actual "counterfeiting boom" took place after World War II until the Islamic Revolution. Fake art items were inscribed to increase the value of the item cause or to convey a supposed authenticity. The inscriptions were often copied from books in order to use them in abridged or modified form. They can be found on metal tablets, clay and stone tablets, figurative and similar objects, weapons, gems and seals. In total, Rüdiger Schmitt recorded 27 forged inscriptions.<sup>[12]</sup>



Phial with forged inscription F 10

In 1953, Roland Grubb Kent listed the known forged inscriptions ("spurious inscriptions"), gave them the name Spurium (abbreviation Spur.) and provided them with an index (spur. a–h). Manfred Mayrhofer added to the list in 1978 (i–k). Rüdiger Schmitt gave them new names in 2007: F for forged and N for replica.<sup>[12]</sup>

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